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ABSTRACT

An abuse prevention program was presented in five elementary schools by an organization called Working to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect (WE CAN). Subjects (N=612) were elementary school students in grades four and five. The prevention program included the film "No More Secrets," question and answer sessions, role plays, and opportunities for private discussions with WE CAN staff members. During the two session program, a pretest and posttest were given containing elements of common sense concepts emphasizing fault, proper terms, good and bad secrets, okay versus not okay touches, and whom to tell. Results indicated a significant difference in knowledge of abuse before and after the program. A posttest administered 2 months later indicated much of the material was retained. Children disclosed existing abuse problems to crisis intervention experts. The results and disclosures indicate the need for this type of program in schools; the program's potential effectiveness in preventing abuse is also discussed. (The pretest/posttest is included.) (ABL)

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Effectiveness of Abuse Prevention Program in Elementary Schools

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Running head: PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract

An abuse prevention program was presented in five Clark County elementary schools. During the two session program, a pretest and post-test containing elements of common abuse concepts emphasizing fault, proper terms, good and bad secrets, ok versus not ok touches, and who to tell was given. Results indicated a significant difference in knowledge of abuse before and after the program. Two months later another post-test was administered and results indicated that a significant amount of information was retained. At the conclusion of the program, all children were given the opportunity to talk about related experiences or to ask questions. From these conversations, a number of children disclosed existing abuse problems to crisis intervention experts. These results and disclosures are discussed and indicate a need for this type of program in schools, and the program's potential for effectiveness in preventing abuse is also discussed.

Effectiveness of Abuse Prevention Program in Elementary Schools

Researchers have recently begun debating the most effective methods for preventing abuse, whether that abuse be physical, sexual, emotional, or neglect. Given the increase in publicity due to the statistical evidence of rising abuse rates in the past ten years. the debate has gained momentum.

Child abuse prevention programs are growing rapidly in response to a national uprising against domestic violence (Barth & Ash, 1986). A literature search reveals no evidence of empirical evaluations as to whether or not these programs decrease the incidence of abuse. Statistics now show that one out of every three boys and one out of every three girls are sexually abused before the age of 18 (Groth, 1987).

Child sexual abuse continues, in part, because children are not taught to recognize, resist, or report sexual assault. Parents may be uncomfortable about discussing sexual assault, or uninformed about appropriate ways for children to respond. School systems may be reluctant to include discussion of sexual assault prevention issues within the curriculum, even though one study found that 87%

of parents interviewed supported the schools' teaching such information (Finkelhor, 1983). The fears most frequently expressed are that children may be frightened by such instruction.

The current study evaluates one such program to find out what children know before instruction, if they learn how to prevent abuse after instruction, and how they react to such a program.

Method

Subjects

Six hundred and twelve Nevada elementary school students, grades 4 and 5, participated in the abuse prevention program. The program was presented in one private and four public elementary schools in the Clark County School District by WE CAN (Working To Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect).

Materials

All students responded to a test administered at three different times. The test was designed to cover the concepts of fault, types of touches, secrets, feelings, and who to tell when in need of support (see Appendix A).

Part I. Before the program was presented, all students completed the 10 item questionnaire administered by WE CAN

staff in order to evaluate how much knowledge the students had regarding abuse.

Part II. Upon completion of the program, to evaluate how much knowledge was learned, all students completed the same questionnaire which was again administered by WE CAN staff.

Part III. Two to three months later, the same test was administered by school personnel. Results were compared to the previous post-test to see how much information was retained.

The film "No More Secrets" was used in the classroom presentation.

Talk slips were used at each school to give the students an opportunity to talk in private with a person of their choice. A decorated talk box was placed in one or two areas within the school, usually the library and counselor's office, where the children could place the talk slips in private. Only resource personnel and WE CAN staff were allowed to open the talk box and read the slips.

Procedure

A number of steps were taken before any student could be a part of the program. WE CAN joined with the Clark County School District to present the abuse prevention program. WE CAN then recruited a support of resource

personnel from each school to handle any disclosures and follow-up any relevant problems. Also, crisis intervention experts were asked to handle personal questions or disclosures after each program, especially in cases where resource personnel had little or no training in the area of child abuse.

Step 1. The principal of each participating school was asked to review the program contract with WE CAN staff. The contract explained the school's responsibilities for their part of the program.

Step 2. A letter was mailed by the school to all parents, explaining the program and asking that any parent who did not want their child to take part in the program to please sign and return a statement to the school before the program's presentation. The parents were also invited to attend a Parent's Presentation designed to explain the program further.

Step 3. A Parent's Presentation was given at which the film "No More Secrets" (1984) was viewed by the parents. An explanation of the importance of the program, how the program would be presented, and open discussion for questions was conducted by WE CAN staff members.

Step 4. A meeting was held to train all resource staff. Resource staff usually consisted of the principal,

school nurse, counselor, school psychologist, or teachers who had a specific interest in child abuse prevention. The training consisted of a description of the responsibilities expected of the resource staff, instructions on how to interview children with abuse problems, and information about the importance of and sources for mandated reporting. Follow-up procedures and ways to obtain technical assistance were also defined.

Step 5. A Teaching Staff Presentation was given to all teachers to inform them of the importance of mandated reporting, to teach them how to recognize symptoms of abuse, and to explain to them how the program would effect their classrooms. Support and assistance by WE CAN staff was offered as well as requests for suggestions or comments.

Two classroom sessions were needed for the presentation of the program to students. The first session was used to administer the pretest, go over relevant materials, answer questions, and identify the different types of abuse. The film was shown at the end of the first session. During the second session there was a review of the presented material, a review of the film, and time given for questions and discussion. Role-plays by two staff members were presented to help the students identify feelings, learn different ways of handling abuse problems, and become aware of what could

happen in different abuse situations. If appropriate, the students were allowed to participate in role-plays in order to train them on assertive behavior. Emphasis was placed on sexual abuse, due to its frequently reported occurrence. At the end of the program, the post-test was given, and, if the teacher allowed, time was made available for open discussion and questions. Talk slips were then given to all students and the WE CAN staff explained their purpose, how to complete them, and where the talk box would be located.

After each program, talk slips were gathered and each student who had requested to talk was called in privately by the office secretary. Students met with the person he or she had requested (usually a WE CAN staff member) in a private room. A crisis interventionist and a WE CAN staff member interviewed each student as a team. A written report of each conversation was recorded for WE CAN's records and filed for possible future use. Copies were also given to the school principal and school psychologist for future follow-up, if needed.

Results

Mean results for both pretests and post-tests for each grade are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

A correlated t-test indicated that there was a significant difference between the pretest and post-test for fourth graders ($t(39) = 4.17$, $p < .05$). Results for fifth graders also indicated a significant difference between the pretest and post-test scores ($t(109) = 5.92$, $p < .05$). Students from both grades had more correct answers on the post-test. The results indicate that much of the information from the program had been retained.

Two to three months later, another post-test was administered to the same groups. A correlated t-test comparing the two post-test scores indicated there was no significant difference between the two scores for either fourth graders ($t(39) = 1.27$, $p > .05$) or fifth graders ($t(109) = 1.32$, $p > .05$). The information gained from the program had been retained two to three months after the program's presentation.

Discussion

The hypotheses that students would have more knowledge of abuse and that they would retain that knowledge were both supported. These findings were not consistent with other recent studies. Swan, Press and Briggs (1985) found no

evidence that learning occurred when children were administered a pretest, then a post-test, after seeing a play on sexual abuse. Conte, Rosen, Saperstein, and Shermack (1985) found that, although children increased their knowledge from one program, they still learned only slightly more than 50% of the concepts taught by the program. In the present study, it was found that children increased their knowledge and knew more than 85% of the concepts after the program.

The abuse concepts were evaluated by the tests and in class. Before the program was presented, approximately 90% of all students felt that if they had a touching problem, it would be their own fault. After the program's presentation, over 90% realized and understood why it would be the adult's fault and answered correctly on the post-test. However, in class a few admitted they would still feel guilty if a touching problem should occur. Summit (1983) admits that in the classsic role reversal of child abuse, the child is given the power to destroy the family and the responsibility to keep it together when the abuse is intrafamilial.

When asked about proper terms for the private parts of the body, approximately 25% of public school students knew the proper terms, whereas almost all used slang terms. When dealing with this subject in the classroom, many giggled,

expressed disbelief that the slang terms were not the proper terms, then expressed acceptance and usage of the correct terms. Most students admitted that proper terms were not used by their parents or peers and this was considered a shameful area to discuss. After the program, over 80% were able to identify the private parts of the body on the post-test.

It was noted that over 60% of the private school students had knowledge and used the correct terms before the program was presented, as compared to only 25% for public school students. At the private schools, names for body parts were discussed in a matter of fact manner with very little or no giggling or nervous behavior. The lack of discomfort shown by these students may have been due to the fact that the school taught these terms in its curriculum.

When initially asked how many students felt that, if abuse should occur, they would be able to tell their mother, approximately 35% felt they could do so. On the post-test, 50% indicated they could. However, during class discussions very few admitted they would tell their mother or a parent. It was also noted in interviews with those students who had already experienced a touching problem, only approximately 15% were able to tell their mother. And of those 15%, only 2% had been believed or had parental support throughout the

ordeal. Most students felt they would not be believed or would be blamed. Pierce and Pierce (1985) indicated that in 20% of the cases they studied, the child's mother refused to believe the child's report of being abused. In 16% of the cases the mother tolerated the abuse, whereas in another 4%, the mother encouraged the abusive behavior.

An essential part of the program was teaching children to be assertive. Hallie (1983) pointed out that the best way to stand up to cruelty is to refuse to remain passive. Hallie's recommendation was made concrete through the use of role-plays and practice in the classroom. Through this procedure, many who felt they could easily say no came to realize how difficult it could be, and many who had felt it was difficult found comfort in learning ways they might be able to say no or get away in case they could not say no.

The children's reactions to the program were very positive. Of six hundred twelve students, only two children reacted in a negative manner (i.e., crying, disruption, or anger). In conversations after the program, these students told crisis intervention experts that they had experienced abuse themselves and may have been in denial or post-traumatic stress. In both cases, neither child had received previous counseling or support, although abuse had been previously reported in one case.

The impact made by the program may have been due to the four main components set up before its presentation. These components include 1) a well trained staff who is well acquainted with the script, knows how to answer questions on abuse, and is very aware and knowledgeable; 2) trained school resource personnel and staff who must do their part in providing support, counseling, and follow-up on a long term basis; 3) the willingness of parents to participate and support their children during and after the program; 4) the inclusion of crisis intervention experts who are available during and after the presentation.

During this study, Community Action Against Rape and Bridge Counseling provided support and assistance for the students who wished to ask questions or make a report after the program. It is very important that those who handle the legal reports also be included and prepared in advance for any disclosures and investigations that might develop through the program. Total involvement and cooperation between agencies and schools is the key to the success of this type of program.

This program is based on the premise that children will be less susceptible to abuse if they are provided with factual information, and are given a chance to discuss their feelings in a supportive environment. The program presented

children with the fact that their bodies are not shameful, but they are private, and they have the right to say no when neccesary. The program stressed the values of avoiding exploitation of another and learning to trust one's feelings rather than give in to coercion. By giving the children support after the program, children realized abuse is something that can be discussed and that help is available.

It was evident in many of the follow-up reports, that children who reported having touching problems or emotional abuse problems were able to find successful ways of coping or stopping the abuse due to WE CAN's program.

Since many prevention programs will not have contact with children over an extended period of time, preparation of parents, teachers, agencies, and other adults who will have such contact seems an important undertaking both to insure prevention and to detect and respond to any long-term effects of abuse should such exist. The current findings indicate that, for effective prevention, a strong program following the guidelines presented here is one means of reaching children. Because of the public school system's consistent and longitudinal contact with children and families, it appears to be the most promising institution for the delivery of preventive efforts and could be most

effective in providing a curriculum in the prevention of child abuse.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Pretest and Post-test Scores for Grades 4 and 5

		NUMBER OF SCORES	MEAN	SD
GRADE 4	PRETEST	40	75.45	21.54
	POST-TEST	40	87.08	15.18
GRADE 5	PRETEST	110	77.21	22.53
	POST-TEST	110	86.98	17.99

Appendix A

PRETEST AND POST-TEST

1. Which of the following is an example of a good touch?
   a. HUG
   b. SLAP
   c. HIT
   d. SHOVE
   e. TOUCH ON THE PRIVATE PART

2. Which of the following is an example of a bad touch?
   a. KISS
   b. HUG
   c. PAT
   d. HANDSHAKE
   e. TOUCH ON THE PRIVATE PART

3. How does your stomach feel when you are unsafe?
   a. GOOD
   b. OK
   c. UPSET
   d. HAPPY
   e. GLAD

4. If an adult told you to take off your clothes while playing a game, how would you feel?
   a. GOOD
   b. OK
   c. UPSET
   d. HAPPY
   e. GLAD

5. What should you do if an adult tells you to take off your clothes while playing a game?
   a. HIDE IN THE CLOSET.
   b. CRY AND DON'T TELL ANYONE.
   c. FORGET ABOUT IT.
   d. SAY NO!
   e. RUN AWAY FROM HOME.

6. Which of the following is a proper name for the private parts of the body?
   a. WEE WEE
   b. BUNS
   c. PENIS
   d. INTESTINES
   e. WIENER

7. If an adult touches you on your private parts, whose fault is it?
   a. MINE
   b. THAT ADULT'S
   c. MINE AND THAT ADULT'S
   d. MY PARENTS'
   e. NOBODY'S

8. Which of the following is an ok secret to keep?
   a. A SURPRISE BIRTHDAY PARTY.
   b. SOMEONE BEATS UP YOUR FRIEND.
   c. YOUR BROTHER USES DRUGS.
   d. GIVE ME YOUR MONEY AND DON'T TELL ANYONE!
   e. YOUR FRIEND TELLS YOU SOMEONE TOUCHED HIS PRIVATE PART.

9. If an adult tricks you into touching his or her private parts, whose fault is it?
   a. MINE
   b. THAT ADULT'S
   c. MINE AND THAT ADULT'S
   d. MY PARENTS'
   e. NOBODY'S

10. If someone touched you in a not ok way, could you tell your mother?
   a. YES, I COULD.
   b. NO, NEVER.
   c. NO, BUT I COULD TELL ANOTHER ADULT AT HOME.
   d. NO, BUT I COULD TELL SOMEONE ELSE I TRUST.
   e. YES, IF I COULD BE ALONE WITH HER.